

## “Before the Foundation of the World”

Sirach 24:1-12 • Wisdom of Solomon 10:15-21 • Ephesians 1:3-14 • John 1:1-18

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Second Sunday of Christmas

We are still, believe it or not, in the season of Christmas. I know, most of the culture around us has already moved on. In many homes trees have been taken down, lights removed, ornaments and decorations put away for another year. Stores are already promoting Valentine’s Day. But in the Church, Christmas is not a *day*, but a *season*, lasting twelve whole days. This used to be well understood in Western culture; when Shakespeare wrote his play *Twelfth Night* four hundred years ago, he was referring to *tonight*, the last night of the Christmas season, the eve of Epiphany. For hundreds upon hundreds of years, Christians celebrated this night with a great deal of feasting and merriment. Charles Dickens made a reference to a children’s Twelfth Night party in *A Christmas Carol*. To this day, in various communities around the world, there will be celebrations tonight; wassailing, baking king’s cake for Epiphany, and ceremoniously taking down Christmas wreaths and trees. Unfortunately, our American culture has become so thoroughly secular that we have lost most of this rich tradition; about the only vestige that remains is the song about twelve lords a-leaping, eleven ladies dancing, ten pipers piping, nine drummers drumming, eight maids a-milking, seven swans a-swimming, six geese a-laying, five golden rings, four French hens, three colly birds, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree – a song which we still hear from time to time, even if we’ve long since forgotten that Christmas should be celebrated for a full twelve days each year. Today is the *last* of the twelve days; let’s make it a good one.

The scripture readings for this second Sunday of Christmas pull us back from the manger, the stable, the nativity, the stories of little Jesus and his family and the special people who visited him. We zoom out to take a much wider view of the whole trajectory of *time*, and Christ’s place within – and beyond – it. The centerpiece, of course, is that majestic prologue to the Gospel according to John, those incredibly inspired and inspirational eighteen verses that proclaim Jesus Christ as the Word of God who was in the beginning *with* God and who *is* God and who *became flesh* and *lived among us* here on earth, radiating with a divine glory, filled with grace and truth. These are some of the most majestic verses in all of scripture. So too is that magnificent passage from Ephesians, which talks about God *choosing* us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love, about our *adoption* in Christ, our *redemption*, our *forgiveness*, our *inheritance*, our *destiny*. Both of these passages are *incredibly* rich; John emphasizes the *incarnation* of Christ, while Ephesians articulates what that incarnation means *for us*, the *benefits* we receive because Christ *came here* in human form.

That word “incarnation” literally means “embodied in flesh” or “taking on flesh.” It derives from two Latin words: the prefix “in” and the noun “caro,” which means “flesh.” A number of other words in English come from that same root, including “carnivore,” a flesh-eating animal; “carnal,” referring to our fleshly desires; “carrion,” dead flesh; “carnage,” the destruction of flesh; “reincarnation,” becoming flesh

again. The idea of “incarnation” is that something – in this case, *Jesus Christ* – became flesh that hadn’t been flesh before. “In the beginning was the *Word* ... and the *Word became flesh*.” Jesus existed *before* Jesus was born. That can be a tough concept for us to wrap our minds around. He existed *long* before he was born; John reveals that Jesus Christ existed *in the beginning, before* God began to create *anything*. Before this earth, this solar system, this galaxy, this *universe*, before *time* as we understand it, Jesus Christ already existed, as the divine *Word*, the divine *reason*, the divine *mind*. The Greek word is *logos*. This *Word*, the *logos*, was *in the beginning* with God; it was not *created*; it is “pre-existent,” that is, it existed, *with* God, and *as* God, before *anything* else. “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” Everything that exists all around us – the flowers, the birds, the trees, the plants, the animals, the waters, this earth, the sky, the planets, the stars, you, me – *all of it* came into existence through the *Word*. The *Word* is the ultimate source of *all that exists*. The *Word* was present in the nothingness that pre-dated creation; it gave birth to creation, it created you and me and the entire natural world around us. John’s stunning, bold declaration is that this divine *Word took human form*. It took on a *fleshy body*. It became *one of us* – without ever ceasing to be *God*.

Today’s two readings from the apocryphal books point in a similar direction. Remember, these books do not carry the same weight as the rest of our scriptures; they are of a secondary status; but they can be illustrative and helpful. The reading from Ecclesiasticus talks about the divine Wisdom, who “came forth from the mouth of the Most High,” who “alone compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss,” who “held sway over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation,” who was created by the Creator “before the ages, in the beginning,” and “for all ages” this Wisdom “shall not cease to be.” The Creator instructed this divine Wisdom to “pitch a tent,” to “encamp” among the people of Israel, “taking root in an honored people,” having a “resting place in the beloved city;” Wisdom’s domain was “in Jerusalem.” Much of the language here is strikingly similar to what we find John saying about Jesus, the incarnate *Word of God*, even to the point of “pitching a tent,” for when John says that the *Word* “lived among us,” that literally means that the *Word* “pitched a tent” or “encamped” in our midst. The only real difficulty in this passage is the notion that the divine Wisdom was *created* by the Creator. Classic Christianity teaches that Jesus was *begotten* by God but not *created* by God. Aside from that detail, *everything else* in this passage could *easily* be said about Jesus.

The reading from the Wisdom of Solomon is similar. The divine Wisdom “entered the soul of a servant of the Lord and withstood dread kings with wonders and signs.” That could be said about Jesus, who survived Herod’s cruelty and performed miracles during Pilate’s reign. The passage describes Wisdom as the divine presence that led the Israelites through the Red Sea back in the book of Exodus. That could be interpreted to say that Jesus, the Wisdom of God, was the divine presence that led the people safely along that perilous way, *and also* that, metaphorically, Jesus, the Wisdom of God, *still* leads people “over the Red Sea” and “through deep waters” – *including* the final journey we will make, when we will, as Shakespeare put it, “shuffle off this mortal coil” and enter the eternal realm of God.

Whether you choose to interpret these two passages as referring to Jesus is up to you. I think these readings can help us as we try to understand the incarnation, the reality that Divinity became human. “The *Word* became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory ... full of grace and truth.” As Christmas comes to a close, let us celebrate – one last time! – the arrival of *God* in this world.

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